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CULTURE X

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MIKE INGLIS
CULTURE X: STREET INTERVENTIONS



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Outline Description

Culture X is my part of a three year project with £30000 joint funding between UKIERI (UK India Education and Research Initiative) and the British Council with a project directive to build an understanding of collaborative work, creating links between the Scottish and Indian education sectors.

The project covering a personal creative response as well as other deliverable elements of the joint project partnership including joint teaching, student & staff exchanges and staff collaborations, on-line activities and creative project outputs.

The project covered challenging cross cultural assumptions and a series of creative responses generated during the partnership and how the teams managed them. This in-turn allowed reflection on key lessons learned from the partnership with Pearl Academy, summarized and presented at a symposium in India.

The project was documented through a series of methods - photograph documentation, design work on shared blog and website content to help introduce the partnership and promote the positive collaboration between the institutions.

After a successful visit by staff from Pearl Academy to Adam Smith College in Scotland, September 08, stage two of the project involving academics was to engage with, experience and evaluate cultural issues relating to the production of Visual Communication artefacts. This cultural exchange shared by academic staff would achieve a greater awareness toward researching and producing project outcomes, PDA modules in visual communications. At this stage the my creative project and the workshops required to accompany it began to be formulated.

Stage three began for myself in February 2010 on the return visit to New Dehli and the Pearl Academy staff with the delivery of Key note lecture on new media and visual communication at the conference held by Pearl for the local business community, the marketing department and senior management of Pearl Academy. **At this point my project Culture X was installed on the streets.**



Arriving during the colours festival after a long flight was a true emersion into indian belief system for me (Mike Inglis on left) and Douglas Mcmillan (on right) the photographer who documented my process.

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Originality

My practice based research component deals with cultural attitudes and assumptions through the production a series of urban art interventions that explore attitudes and expectations to work found outside of normal art or design environments. The interventions took place in New Dehli, India during the spring of 2010.

The project has also seen me run workshops for students and design practitioners as well as presenting lectures at design symposiums exploring web communication and branding.

My practice has two distinct sides; one which is based around gallery spaces with screenprinted images, 3D installations and found objects and the other which is based in the street or urban environment and is very figurative. They have an evolving and symbiotic relationship where one feeds and nurtures the other.

This project explores cultural identity and contemporary belief systems through the documentation of a series of urban art interventions in New Dehli, India. The work consists of paste ups; figurative human scale drawings

The thrust of the idea is to create paste ups which explore my sense of cultural identity which is central to my practice and then to take these figures into a foreign and overwhelmingly alien culture. The pastes up are juxtaposed with the environments to create new contexts and open dialogues which explore our relationships with each other and the spaces we inhabit. The paste ups are transient by nature and the project was documented photographically Visual Communication staff from Adam Smith College travelled to Pearl Academy, Delhi as part of the joint three year Ukieri project between the academic institutions.

I also documented what happened to the interventions post install re-visiting them to record any public interactions. Many were left intact however some were censored or even removed.



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Process

My personal work often explores public spaces and this has led to commissions in the area of Public Art which explore similar territories but with a new set of materials and processes. Working at the intersection where Urban art meets Fine Art and Public Art allows me to investigate ideas of autonomy within Public Art and to question methods and processes. Where street art relishes complete autonomy in illegal status, as arguably most contemporary art does, Public Art must explore very different processes to achieve a successful outcome and I am very interested in what sort of new dialogues this opens and what kind of new approaches this involves and how this in turn alters the creative outcome.

Workshops // Working with youth groups / student groups to explore what street art actually can be and also how to create it allows access to often the most overlooked of young story tellers in our culture. These workshops will be aimed at creating narratives / spreading messages and personal stories.

They allow autonomous authorship but also teach an ethical approach to how the message is delivered. They also explore collaborative practice and mixed media in the style of “Rough Cut Nation” or “Freedom Versions” shows.

Talks and interviews // While students will be able to access workshops, it is anticipated that more mature members of the community might engage more willingly attending artists talks and allow follow up interviews.

This allows access to some very personal stories and approaches to narrative building and will also enable individual New Dehli people to become the initial custodians of the work. They will learn the code or language of the narratives contained in the artworks that will ultimately enable them to explore, respond and embrace the artworks produced as the final installations.

The workshops that have been undertaken, while original in their format, have been developed using tried and tested ethnographic techniques, involving community participation, physical engagement with the site, and the academic interrogation provided by the senior academics at PEARL academy and their Scottish counterparts



Street art workshops begin the process of dialogue with the visual communication department of pearl allowing many personal and social themes to be explored without regard for censorship.

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Rigour

Development, research and generation of content for the production of PDA/CDP's allowed staff members to undertake joint collaborative visual communication projects.

This was viewed as a very positive way to move the project to the next phase and staff members were enthusiastic about the opportunity to work together. Four key themes arising from the discussions were identified that I used to underpin my project and workshops.

Social awareness issues across the two cultures.

Urban awareness projects.

Languages, communication and typography.

Population, space and social voicing and exclusion.

Gaining permissions on an ad hoc basis from the property owners of the sites through the translation services of my translator and assistant Rishabh Arora.

Rishabh was a student graphic designer who was also very keen to learn about this form of direct communication allowing him to pursue personal themes about his sexuality and the heavy levels of prejudice in India which often is not allowed a mainstream discussion or acceptable outlet.

At each intervention we engaged in a very robust discussion with the public about the nature of street art and also the nature of this particular set of images.

After the interventions were installed we photographed them and then revisited the sites twice to document any interactions that may have taken place.



Negotiation and discussion played an important and invaluable role in understanding cultural assumptions towards street art which was often mistaken for advertising for unknown products or festivals.

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Significance

My street intervention work opens a dialogue with the public – a direct dialogue while installing the work and then a series of installations within a close proximity to each other which explore a loose narrative.

There is a far more direct and enjoyable interaction that takes place when the paste ups are directly adapted, pasted over, even removed or edited by members of the local community within which they are installed. Natural weathering plays a part also in the embedding of the images.

Two sites were selected – neither is an area which sees tourists

Nariana Industrial estate, a primarily industrial area with many small business's involved in manufacturing and metal working as well as many printing works.

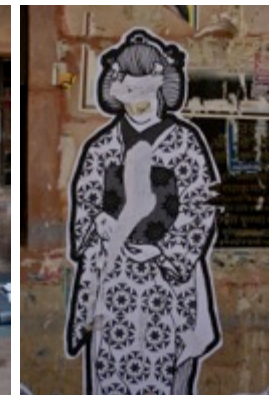
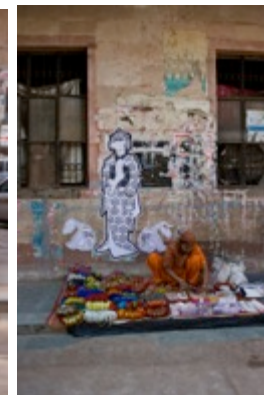
Karol Bagh a predominantly working class area which merges with an area that was described as a ghetto by my Indian colleagues. It should be noted that this working class area might be considered as far less prosperous than comparison its European counterpart..

They were picked because they are common placement sites for street art in a European context and also a location where artwork would be likely to survive for more than a few hours before removal by local authorities.

While all of the paste-ups were left untouched in the Nariana industrial areas many of the figures were altered or removed in the Karol Bagh area.

The figure of the woman standing had her eyes removed – perceived to be giving the evil eye was the considered opinion and the skeleton dog companions had their tail bones masked, again misinterpreted as the penis of the dog they were demurely censored.

All masked figures (space helmets) were removed entirely – considered either threatening (military) or supernatural – no faces or souls.



The alterations made in the Karol Bagh area also played an important part in understanding cultural differences in image interpretation especially when images were placed within a tight knit community who lived much of their life in the street

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Significance

The location and experience of New Dehli experience left me challenging everything I knew and all of my long held Scottish values.

The documentation shows the finished series of urban art interventions in New Dehli, India, consisting of paste ups; figurative human scale drawings juxtaposed with the environments to create new contexts and open dialogues which explore our relationships with each other and the spaces we inhabit.

The idea of creating the paste ups which explore my sense of cultural identity is central to my practice. To take these Scottish figures into a foreign and overwhelmingly alien culture will heighten this sense of identity and the paste up installations will explore this.

Street art is any art developed in public spaces - that is, "in the streets" — though the term usually refers to art of an illicit nature (as opposed to, for instance, government or community art initiatives). The term can include traditional graffiti artwork, though it is often used to distinguish modern public-space artwork from traditional graffiti and the overtones of gang territoriality and vandalism associated with it.

India has a rich tradition of hand driven commercial advertising and signage as well as many other highly decorated forms of building adornment, from beautiful stone carving more typical of palaces to the Bhunga tribe in India, who decorate their mud homes with paint, raised mud and mirrors. With this in mind I made certain assumptions about their reactions and interpretations of street art which were to prove completely incorrect.

Culturally the urban Indian experience it was discovered is driven by ferocious advances in the Indian global position and their approach to marketing and visual communication is one of adopting and absorbing the rules of post modern Bauhaus theory wholesale to create a very westernized approach to advertising and signage at the expense of their traditional hand painted and quite beautifully eccentric previous modes of advertising.

The two locations provoked two quite different reactions to the work and were interesting in the different perspectives they revealed, culturally and to street art as a medium. (continued over)



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Significance

Nariana Industrial estate, the primarily industrial area the work met initially with much attention and a mix of confusion and hostility from the crowds of workers who gathered to watch the installations. Through translation a series of very robust discussions took place and from this it was discovered that the work was interpreted as some kind of competitive advertising and as such seen as unfair competition. While no clear message or product was driven by the work the only framework that the workers could clearly understand or relate to was that of commercial visual communication particularly in an industrial area.

The series of discussions became very interesting as street arts intentions to utilise public space as well as to subvert contemporary advertising and to communicate directly with the public as well as technically belonging to the public was explored. The idea of free art owned by a collective public met with reactions that varied from approval, to astonishment. That said artwork was produced for free and received no financial reward was also met with a mixture of astonishment and disbelief. Once this was absorbed it seemed to allow a much calmer reading and relationship with the artwork. Every single piece of work in Nariana was left intact and allowed to weather into its location, many lasted 3 months or more and were finally “erased” by the monsoon rains and humidity combined.

In Karol Bagh the predominantly working class area the artwork received a far more robust interaction as described earlier the paste ups were read far more intuitively and were censored, modified and altered. The variety of ways the paper installs were modified depending on the interpretations of the figures and some of the icons used in the graphics, masks, bones, feathers and headwear met with very different cultural assumptions.

By far the most interesting was when the very low caste street trader woman who laid out their wares on blankets every day cut the eyes out of the female figure perceiving it as giving the evil eye to their customers and being very bad luck to be associated with. They did however leave the figure intact in place! They also covered the bones of the skeletal dogs inwardly curling tails with little stickers mistaking them for the penis of the dogs (see page six).

The projects energy and conceptual force, both the performance of installing it publicly and the images communication and messages are always attached to a degree of risk. The absence of a culture of street art was a real obstacle in initial perception and reception however the anarchic nature was greeted openly when it was discovered that the pieces were visual art. It was a thoroughly rewarding experience which leaves an open door for future projects which continue to explore and communicate ideas through this medium which is compelled to state something in and with the city, a mixture of protest, beauty, subversion and examinations of belief.



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